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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV RU FR

SUBJECT: FRANCE/RUSSIA: WHERE IS MEDVEDEV? PUTIN TO VISIT PARIS; KOUCHNER IN MOSCOW

Classified By: A/POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR ANDREW YOUNG FOR REASONS  
1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) Alexandre Vulic, the MFA's DAS-equivalent for Russia, told us on May 20, that FM Kouchner was en route to Moscow for talks with both President Medvedev and FM Lavrov.

Publicly, the focus of the "last-minute" visit is to share EU Presidency priorities with the Russian government and to discuss a host of bilateral issues including: Iran, Lebanon, Burma, the Balkans, Georgia, and Afghanistan. Vulic explained, however, that the chief purpose of the visit is to personally deliver an invitation to President Medvedev from President Sarkozy, asking him to visit Paris before July 1 when France assumes the EU Presidency. Vulic reminded us that in October 2007, when Sarkozy visited Moscow, he issued an invitation to Putin to visit Paris in the spring of 2008, no matter his political future. Putin has taken Sarkozy up on the invitation and is scheduled to be in Paris on May 29.

The GOF is apparently concerned about the optics of a Putin visit, worried that it may appear as if France continues to regard Putin as Russia's leader. Vulic said that the GOF hopes to be able to qualify Putin's trip to Paris as a preparatory visit for Medvedev. There is apparently a great deal of regret in the GOF about the October invitation to Putin. Medvedev is currently only scheduled to visit France in November 2008 in connection the EU/Russia Summit in Nice.

¶2. (C) Vulic told us that France would attempt to play down Putin's May 29 visit to Paris, particularly if Medvedev cannot accept France's invitation. Publicly, Putin's visit will focus on bilateral issues such as energy investments, France/Russia security and defense cooperation, and other issues for which Russian PMs are typically competent. Vulic noted, however, that Sarkozy will receive Putin, and that private discussions are likely to focus on broader foreign policy issues. Vulic stressed that France wants to maintain extremely good relations with Putin given his obviously strong role in the government, but believes that it is equally as important to give appropriate recognition to the presidency as an institution. Asked about the new Moscow government, Vulic replied that France is in "wait and see mode."

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